

Robert Ryman (American, 1930-2019)

[Ryman at Xavier Hufkens](#)

[Ryman at David Zwirner](#)



Ryman, 1974

Ryman Archives

“I don’t think of myself as making white paintings. I make paintings; I’m a painter. White paint is my medium,” Ryman explained in an in-depth [1971 interview with ArtForum](#) about medium, material, support, light, and exhibiting his work. “When I begin, I’m never quite sure what the result is going to be. The process is actually making the painting, that’s all...When I start doing it, I discover things that I hadn’t thought could be there; I change it...until I end up with the final result.” Ryman also spoke about his life and professional practice with the [Smithsonian Archives of American Art](#), in 1972, and in 1977 in a televised interview for the program [Inside New York’s Art World](#).

In 1993, MoMA hosted the [most comprehensive survey of Ryman’s career](#) to date in the United States, tracing the artist’s career from 1955 with over 80 paintings, many never seen before in public. Digital resources include archival installation photographs and a PDF of the out-of-print [exhibition catalogue](#).

For an exhibition [at Xavier Hufkens](#) in 2000, Ryman selected 20 paintings created in the 1960s, which left his studio for the first time upon installation, thus completing each work through the revelation of lights and the individual perception of each viewer.

[The Brooklyn Rail](#) spoke to Ryman in 2007 for his [exhibition at Pace Gallery](#). “There’s no symbolism. There’s no narrative in this painting. They’re not pictures of things that we know, so that may be difficult for some people... It’s not a matter of seeing something in it... even something about it...it’s a matter of having an experience, a visual experience that is pleasing... The what of the painting is incidental to the how. What you experience in painting is how it’s put together. How it’s done.”

“In painting, something has to look easy, even though it might not be easy. That’s an important part of painting, that it has to have that feeling of, like it just happened,” Ryman reflected in a [2007 video for Art21](#) about his practice and the relationship between art and music. “I thought the painting should just be about what it’s about...I look at [it] as solving problems and work and a visual experience.”

Ryman’s first solo show in D.C. filled galleries at [the Phillips Collection](#) in 2010, focusing on early explorations in color, small square canvases, and the devices with which each piece is hung on the wall. [Ryman discussed the works on view](#) and their history in a gallery tour while installation was in progress.

[Los Angeles Kohn Gallery](#) paired Ryman with Italian painter Giorgio Morandi in 2015. Though a generation and continents apart, both painters employed muted palettes, light, and shadow to create delicate and highly nuanced compositions that rewarded careful attention.

Six decades of Ryman’s work was on view at the [Dia Art Foundation, Chelsea](#) in 2016, celebrating the artist’s subtle negotiations with color on a diverse array of supports including textiles, canvas, and board; aluminum, fiberglass, and Plexiglas. Dia also organized a two-part symposium in which scholars discussed [Ryman’s legacy](#) and innovative [approach toward materials](#).

[ARTnews](#) and national publications including [Apollo Magazine](#) and [The Guardian](#) commemorated Ryman’s life and career upon his passing in 2019.



Ryman, 2004, Photo: Ruby Washington

Robert Ryman (American, 1930-2019)

26" Square, 1963

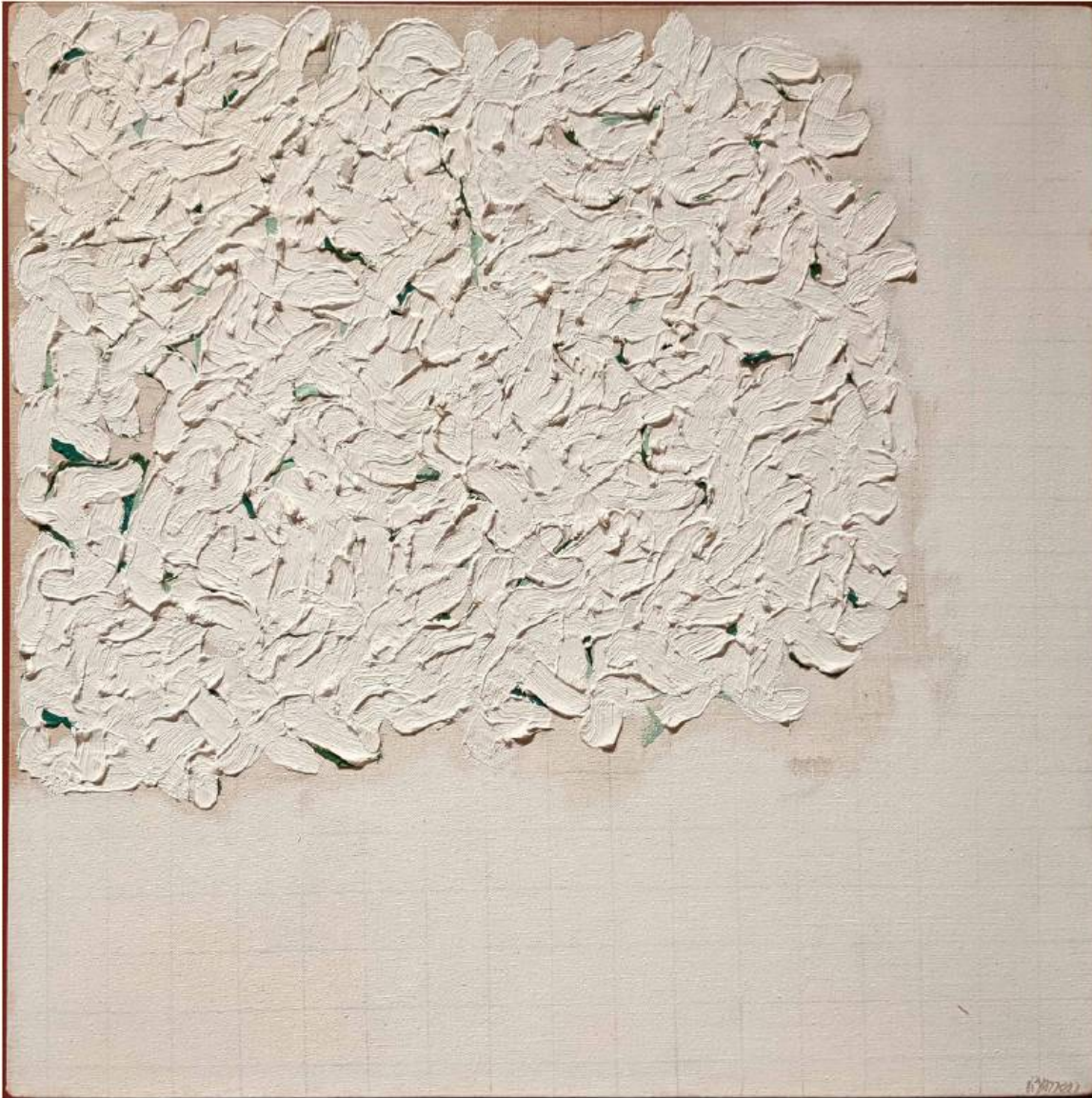
Oil, gesso, and graphite on stretched sized linen canvas

Private Collection; L2021:83.4

Born in Nashville, Tennessee, Robert Ryman moved to New York City in 1953 to become a professional jazz saxophonist. For seven years, Ryman worked as a security guard at the Museum of Modern Art, where he spent hours examining Abstract Expressionist works by Willem de Kooning (1904-1997), Barnett Newman (1905-1970), Jackson Pollock (1912-1956), Mark Rothko (1903-1970), and Clyfford Still (1904-1980). Inspired by this developing movement, Ryman purchased art supplies and began experimenting with his own white-on-white paintings in the late 1950s. **26" Square** is one of Ryman's earliest works of monochromatic squares, marking the beginning of a successful four-decade career as a visual artist. Famously, Ryman remarked, "There is never a question of what to paint but only how to paint."

On view July 14 – December 12, 2021





Robert Ryman (American, 1930-2019)

Untitled (Napier I), 1961

Oil, graphite, and gesso on stretched cotton canvas

Private Collection; L202183.5

“The white is just a means of exposing other elements. White enables other things to become visible.” Robert Ryman is best known for the rough, white-on-white paintings he began producing in the 1960s. Though **Untitled (Napier I)** might appear monochromatic, color and shadow peek through in unexpected places. Ryman often applied bright colors before layering thick strokes of white oil paint. Under different lighting conditions, the canvas’s hue can change. Combined with exposed canvas at the edges, the artist’s technique embraces the raw materiality of painting as a medium – an impulse reflective of the Abstract Expressionists that inspired this early work.

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